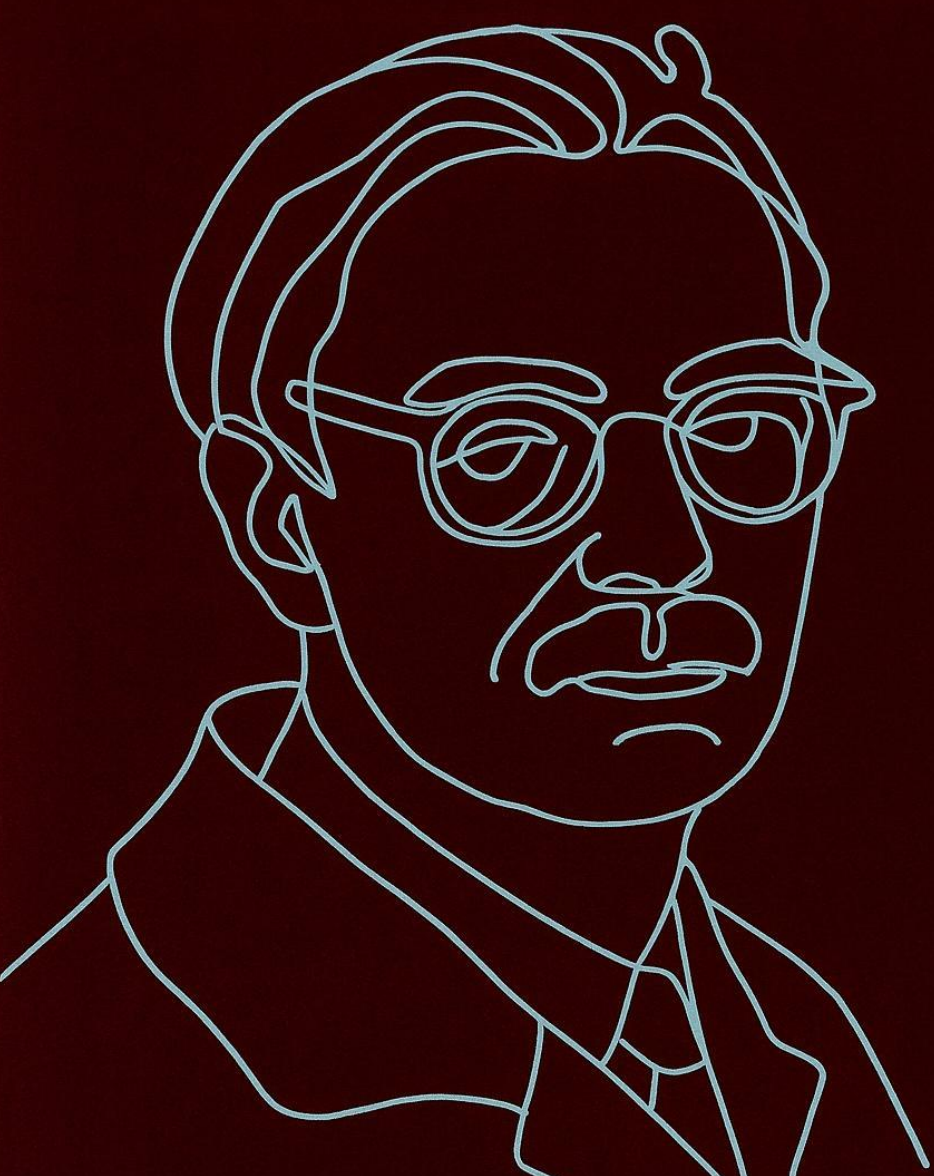
COMÊ-LO-IA



Alba Pratalia

COMÊ-LO-IA

Brazil, Nathan said, is a magnificent latrine of a country—an enormous, steaming, samba-playing toilet. Populated by several smaller toilets walking around pretending to be people. But, he admitted, it had its moments. Once upon a time, they had Jânio Quadros, a president so drunk he was practically a national cocktail. A man who could hiccup democracy and vomit charm.

A journalist, in a moment of heroic futility, once asked him,
"Mr. President, why do you drink?"
And Quadros, legend that he was, answered:
"I drink because it's liquid. Were it solid, I'd eat it."

Even in English, Nathan said, the grammar—**the consecutio temporum**—twists your neurons into a pretzel. Particularly if your education happened in

one of those underdeveloped, socially fragile, still-developing, perpetually-Netflix-addicted countries—like the United States.

But in Portuguese, ah… in Portuguese, it sings:

Bebo porque é líquido. Se fosse sólido, comê-lo-ia.

Comê-lo-ia.

Nathan repeated it like an incantation, like he was tasting the syllables: sweet, decadent, and smug. Because in Portuguese, pronouns aren't just pronouns. They're **clingy little bastards**. They can't stand alone. They must **attach** to verbs like drunk lovers clinging to your sleeve at 3 a.m.—and where they cling depends on tense, mood, or divine inspiration.

Usually, they politely go before (*eu o como* — "I eat it") or after (*comer-o-ei* — "I will eat it"). But when the verb gets futuristic or conditional, the language gets horny for complication.

You can't say *o comerei* (it sounds like you're swallowing a mosquito), and *comerei-o* is just barbaric.

So what does Portuguese do? It performs a surgical operation—slides the pronoun right into the middle of the verb, splitting it open like a linguistic pomegranate:

comer + o + ia → comê-lo-ia ("to eat + it + would → would-eat-it").

Elegant.
Completely unnecessary.
And utterly beautiful.

Nathan lit a cigarette, took a drag, and muttered, "Only a drunk country could invent grammar that classy."

That elegance, Nathan thought — that exquisite, drunken, lace-curtained elegance — and people still trip over the simplest verbs.

Take the classics: *"Vou descer o lixo"* (I'm going to take down the trash).
Perfectly fine in Portuguese. Intransitive verb, suddenly domesticated, house-trained.
Spanish does it too: *"Dile si me sube las compras."* (Tell him to bring up the groceries.)
Italian, naturally, adds a little filth: *"Scendi il cane che lo piscio."* (Take the dog down, I gotta piss him.)
That one, Nathan said, deserves a UNESCO heritage plaque for cultural honesty.

And then there's English. Ah, English, the global lingua franca of misplaced apostrophes. Watch any YouTube video with a golden retriever and your faith in humanity evaporates like cheap gin in the sun.

"Dogs run to they're owner."
"Austria showing off it's castles."
"Your late."

A language that conquered half the world, and still can't tell the difference between "your" and "you're." Civilization's greatest empire, and it dies on the hill of third-grade possessives.

Nathan, who in school had been the **absolute worst** at grammar — the kind of student whose essays made teachers pray for meteors — now found himself pacing his apartment like some deranged Bernard Shaw, muttering over clauses and apostrophes, dissecting dangling modifiers like medical specimens.

He'd become Professor Higgins of the Unwashed Internet.
The Henry Higgins of TikTok.
The man who saw syntax as sin.

"Hell," Nathan concluded, dragging on a cigarette and glaring at the glow of his laptop,
"is other people's grammar."

“No, no, no,” said Nathan, waving a cigarette like a conductor’s baton of despair. “I just want to get drunk and die politely in my sleep. I don’t want to care about things. Things are exhausting. Grammar—now there’s a monumentally stupid thing. Just some random agreement we all made one afternoon so we could pretend to understand each other.”

He took another drink. “People should speak however they want. Write however they feel. Communicate in interpretive dance if they must. It’s fine. Everything’s fine.”

He leaned back, half laughing, half drowning. “Why even bother with precision?” he continued. “Why write *‘He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish’*—the cleanest, most perfect sentence ever composed by a sober mammal—when you could just say *‘Fish and it’s fisher on a boat’*? Same meaning, right? Pulitzer, Nobel, TikTok caption—it’s all language.”

Nathan stared at the ceiling.
“Overachieving,” he said. “That’s what that is. The disease of caring too much about verbs and beauty. Meanwhile the world runs on memes captioned ‘your so cute’.”

He raised his glass, half salute, half funeral.
“To mediocrity,” he said, “the most democratic language of all.”

Borges, that hexagonal blind librarian of mirrors and sand, sitting in his infinite library of echoing adjectives, said that English was finer than Spanish. English — that two-headed serpent of Saxon and Latin, biting itself and apologizing for the mess. “For every idea,” he said, “you have two words.” Regal and kingly. Fraternal and brotherly. Dark and obscure. Spirit and ghost. The man made vocabulary sound like chess pieces arranged by God himself.

And sure, sure, the *anphisbæna porteña* spoke — devouring his books with both mouths, one quoting

Milton, the other reciting Quevedo. Because yes, obviously, every student in every English-speaking country sits around knowing perfectly that *kingly* exists. That "ghost" is a "fine, dark Saxon word," and "spirit" is a "light Latin one." Oh yes. The youth of Manchester and Milwaukee rise each morning, reciting etymologies over their cereal.

Nathan laughed. "Borges, my man," he said to no one, "you overestimated the species."

He imagined Borges on YouTube comment sections, seeing *"Your a angle not a devil"* and *"This song hits different fr."*
The man would have clawed his way out of the library, straight into the grave he was already in.

Yes, Jorge, sure — English gives you tricks with verbs and prepositions that are basically language-level sleight-of-hand. "Laugh off," "dream away," "live down," "live up to" — shove a preposition at the back of a verb and you get a new life for the

idea, a little shove of meaning where Romance tongues need a paragraph and a footnote.

Nathan snorted. “It’s handy,” he said. “You can make a verb do cartwheels, then sit it down with a whiskey and a cigarette.” The language lets you be polite, lofty, and then five seconds later rude as a drunk uncle — all with the same verb and a different tiny word. Regal / kingly, spirit / ghost — fine; but throw in a particle and suddenly you’ve both excused a crime and scheduled a funeral.

And yes, Borges left out the filthy little cousins on purpose, or out of decency, or because the blind librarian preferred marble to mud. Either way: the same machinery that crafts *“dream away”* also makes *“I’ll fuck your brains out”* possible — which is to say English holds a place for the sublime and the obscene on the same shelf, sometimes on the same page. You can be metaphysical at breakfast and pornographic by lunch without changing verbs, just the company they keep.

“Clever,” Nathan said, “and terrifying. A language that can bless the soul and then, with the same syntax, announce a hankering for immediate fornication — now that’s efficiency.” He pictured Borges polishing a volume of etymologies with one hand and sighing into a glass with the other, as if to say: of course I know these words; some things you don’t put in the library catalogue.

“So what?” Nathan finished, raising his glass. “If a language lets you *live up to* your promises and *wank yourself to sleep* afterward, that’s not a flaw. It’s versatility. Let the poets write about the Holy Spirit in Latin lace; let the barstools handle the rest. Between regal and kingly, spirit and ghost, there’s room for both the sermon and the swear. Languages are messy. So are we. Cheers to both.”

Words — just words — and how many he'd used, and how many more he'd read and then heard, in bursts, passed along, handed over, whispered, spat, spun around, revered. Fitted for the morning,

dressed for evening wear, with the joy of words he filled his jaws and bounced them through the air.

He was a travelling salesman of moods and phrases, hauling samples three hundred to the minute: nostalgic, pissed off, cursed just enough, ironic in the precise measure required to serve — to scratch an itch while choking on a collar fit for dogs or a jester's pillory.

He painted makeup on wandering metonymies because the idiots everywhere hated freedom so much they called it "whining," or "old wafers of faith."

He would stop playing with words — but it was an ancient vice, and if a punchline called, he'd gladly be skinned alive. There was always chatter, endless chatter; it was his pleasure to give breath to trumpets while wine or exotic fumes echoed in his mind. Words detonated like bombs, mud-puddles of poetry uttered from a chair, garlands of semantics,

the grand tango of the mass media — and Nathan, as ever, kept time with the clap.

Nathan, in his usual linguistic suicide mission, once tried to deploy the word *synecdoche* in public. He'd said, quite academically, that when he shouted "fuck the Jews," it was, of course, a *synecdoche*—the whole standing in for the part, i.e. *fuck the Israeli murderers who bomb and starve hospitals and children,* not any Jewish person simply minding their business, living a life, maybe baking something nice.

But syntax, Nathan discovered, is a fragile shield against outrage. Grammar, that divine art of precision, failed him spectacularly. He was scolded, censored, dragged off like a heretic whose Latin pronunciation had gone out of tune.

"What a marvelous irony," he muttered later, "that I was damned not for hatred, but for rhetorical technique."

He sighed. “All because people don’t study figures of speech. You try to teach the world *synecdoche*, and they give you a trial instead of a thank-you note.”

He poured another drink. “Hell,” he said, “if grammar could hang a man, I’d be long dead, swinging next to the subjunctive.”

Lucky enough, Nathan thought, English at least shows mercy in its mediocrity. The language is so phonetically lazy that even its abortions of grammar are pronounced the same as their healthy siblings. You can write “your” for “you’re” and still get laid — providence or pity, who knows.

But imagine — *just imagine* — Nathan at full mast, ready to honor nature’s finest impulses, and then hearing:
“I’m going to suck **you’re** dick.”
Instant permafrost. Not even divine intervention could raise him again. The blood would pack its bags and take the first train to dignity.

Still, nothing kills arousal quite like continental syntax. He remembered once scrolling Pornhub, harmlessly, educationally, and stumbling upon an Italian amateur title:
*"Apre le gambe della moglie e **gli** lecca la figa."*
The "gli" — masculine dative — where "le" should be. That one microscopic pronoun turned eros into necrosis.

"There is no sperm to be ejected after that," Nathan said. "It's the death of reproduction itself. Grammaricide."

If humanity were truly grammar-sensitive, contraception would be obsolete. Forget pills, condoms, or abstinence pledges — just play someone a voice note of *'he readed'* or *'si j'aurais su'* instead of *'si j'avais su'*, and watch entire generations evaporate in disgust.

Nathan laughed, tragic and tipsy: "We could end overpopulation with a misplaced pronoun. The ministry of syntax would save the world."

Nathan remembered it vividly — the annual academic mating dance of incompetence. End of semester, everyone bleary-eyed, papers stacked like gravestones, and then came the chorus from the literature teachers:

“Can you help me?” they’d ask the science staff, clutching their grade sheets like sacred scrolls. “I can’t calculate an average. I’m so bad at math, hehe.”

Always with that giggle. The small, proud, tinkling giggle of someone confessing stupidity as if it were a zodiac sign.

And the science teachers — those poor bastards — would boil silently in their lab coats. You could see their knuckles whitening around their mechanical pencils. Finally, one of them would snap:

“Oh, really? How delightful. Because I, for one, don’t have the privilege of not knowing how to **speak**. I can’t stroll around the campus saying, ‘Oh,

I can't use prepositions, hehe,' or 'I never quite got the hang of the past perfect continuous, tee-hee.' If I wrote reports like your students write essays, people would die in hospitals."

Nathan, a failing grammar student himself, had watched the scene from the back row with the serenity of a monk in hell.

He once said, "If English teachers can brag about not knowing math, I should be able to misquote Shakespeare and call it calculus."

Nathan remembered them—oh, he remembered them far too well. The literature teachers, red pens trembling with caffeine and delusion, shrieking down the hall like crows in tweed:
"You must write more! More! *MORE!*"

As if volume were a virtue. As if Shakespeare had been paid by the pound. "An essay minimum twenty pages," they'd say, holding up their little rubrics like commandments from Mount Mediocrity. Nathan could still see the faces of his classmates, pale with terror and ink stains, trying to inflate ideas with enough hot air to make a Zeppelin proud.

And there he sat, thinking:
Is there a better way to murder a language than to force it into abuse?

They called it *developing thought.* Nathan called it manslaughter by paragraph.

He once tried quoting Jefferson to one of them — "The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do." The teacher smiled as though he'd just told her a fart joke in Latin. "Yes, Nathan, but for the sake of your grade, use fifty anyway."

He thought of the poets who knew better. Of Ungaretti, who in eight words said everything:
Si sta come in autunno sugli alberi le foglie.

There. A universe. A man, a war, mortality, and the breath between. In English, clumsily: *We are, in autumn, on trees, the leaves.* Eight words that fall as softly as they die.

And these people—these professorial necromancers—wanted twenty pages on *themes of human fragility in the modernist landscape.*

Twenty.

Nathan once asked, "If a poet can hold death in a breath, why must I hold mediocrity for twenty pages?"

They marked him down for *lack of elaboration.*

He sighed. “They don’t teach literature,” he said later. “They embalm it. Wrap it in MLA format, suffocate it under word count, and call it education.”

He poured himself a drink. “If words were wine,” he said, “the best of them would be distilled. Instead, we serve them by the gallon.”

Then, looking up from the rim of his glass:
“They pay you to teach language? They actually let you?”

Nathan held up two glass slides of language to the light like a lab tech proving a point to a roomful of geniuses who’d failed basic eyesight.

“Think of this incipit (‘beginning’ for our friends deprived of study of the classics)
‘He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops of the pine trees’
And this ending: **‘He could feel his heart beating against the pine needle floor of the forest’.**”

That’s it, he said. Spine and sternum. Breath in; breath out. The entire organism humming. You can hear the wind, you can taste the sap, you can count the heartbeats with your thumb. Two sentences like two clean cuts with a scalpel.

“Make that into 20 pages, you moronic mannequins.” Nathan’s lip curled. “They gave you a diploma, actually

allowed you to graduate. ‘Teachers’ they call you. Hilarious. Your craft is embalming, not teaching. Your method is bloat. Your sacrament is padding. You don’t ‘analyze’—you waterboard a paragraph till it confesses to crimes it didn’t commit.”

He tapped the first sentence again. “There’s a body on the earth. Face down. Gravity. Pine. Wind. A whole war tucked beneath the ribs. And you want… what, exactly? A literature of bubble wrap? Footnote the needles? Provide a historiography of bark? Diagram the wind till it stops blowing?”

He tapped the last one. “The heart. The floor. A pulse drumming through mulch. That is a complete cathedral. The rest is scaffolding you forgot to take down.”

He paced. “But by all means—run your little factory. Stretch two honest lines across twenty pages of pale gruel. Assign word counts the way butchers assign weights. Call it rigor. Call it curriculum. Call it ‘learning outcomes.’ What it really is: the holocaust of language and communications. You Mengele of words, Heichman of sentences.”

He poured a drink and didn’t bother to sit. “Here’s the part you never grasp: compression is not poverty; it’s power. When a line is cut to the muscle, it carries voltage. Every extra clause is a wet blanket thrown on a live wire. But you adore the blankets. Warm, heavy, airless. The student staggers out with a passing grade and a strangled voice.”

He slipped the two sentences back into his pocket like contraband jewels. “Write less. Mean more. Or keep making sausages from nightingales and calling it pedagogy. I can’t stop you.”

He turned toward the door, already bored of them. “Me? I’ll take the man on the needles and the drum in the dirt. Keep your rubrics, your margins, your twenty-page autopsies. I prefer the pulse.”

Ok ok—enough theory. We must join Nathan now. This is getting *too* good to be true, and we can’t let him have all the fun with language while we sit like tourists in syntax.

Author: *in.*

Us: “Hey Nathan—”

Misstep. Foot hits something slippery.
Time slows.
A graceful, cinematic pirouette of doom. Legs up, arms flailing, the body forming a perfect scissor kick that would impress any Soviet gymnast, and—

CRACK.

Landing directly on the sacrum. The sound of vertebrae filing for divorce.

“Ouch. Ouch. *Porcodio*, Nathan, what the fuck?”

Nathan, not looking up from his cigarette:
“Cat vomit. Told ya I wouldn’t clean it up.”

There was a silence. A holy, reverent silence, broken only by the faint squish beneath our palms.

“Damn you, Nathan,” we groaned. “You actually said so.”

He exhaled a long plume of smoke, looked at the mess on the floor, then at us.
“I say a lot of things,” he said. “You people never listen till it smells.”